

Kingdom of the Barbaries

The Life, Death, and New Life of a Race

By

John H. Burkitt

THE GOLDEN AGE

Once there was a wonderful place which lay between the depths of the Mediterranean and the sands of the Sahara. It was a lush and green land, crowned with snow-capped mountains. Red deer ate grass in highland meadows and cool, moist winds from the sea fanned the branches of mighty trees which grew untouched by man. This was the Kingdom of the Barbaries, a land whose span from Egypt to Morocco fell under the watchful gaze of the largest lions on earth. At sunset, each male would raise his cry: "He inchi ya nani? Yangu, yangu, yangu!" It was an ancient claim: "Whose land is this? It is mine, mine, mine!" And for uncounted millennia, no wise creature dared to dispute that claim.



The male Barbary was an awesome sight. He weighed more than 500 pounds and could reach 10 feet from his ears to the tip of his tail. His mane was large, thick, and very dark, and ran along his chest clear to the belly, the crowning glory of a king. The female was a mighty huntress whose face was squared and full of character. She bore her king sons and daughters who grew strong on a diet richer than cow's milk.

Day after day, season after season, year after year, down the span of endless centuries, the unhurried rhythms of birth, growth, death, and new life went on according to ancient ways.

What the first Barbary to see a man thought about it, we shall never know. Was he curious? Afraid? Just what was this strange creature who walked upright on two legs? It was danger.

The land that was their home is now barren and windswept. Empty fields stare back where forests used to thrive, and the kings no longer cry their challenge to the sunset. Only the mountains remain.



A new race of kings rules the land. They gather about their campfires and tell their children about the way things used to be when lions walked among them. And perhaps you can detect in their hushed reverence a note of respect--and regret--as they think of what might have been. Read how this came to pass: it is a sad tale, but as you shall see, it is not without hope.

THE COMING OF MAN

The first humans in the Kingdom of the Barbaries clung to the River Nile for protection against the harshness of the desert. These Egyptians were the first to challenge the Barbary Kings with spears and arrows. But the sanctuary of the Atlas Mountains was still the sovereign land of the lions for several centuries.

3000 years ago the Berbers came out of Europe to found small villages across the mountains and eke out a living from small farms. Though they defended their homes against the lions, but they were nothing like the threats to come.

While the Berbers lived on in small villages, other men had grand visions of imperial might. The Assyrians and Persians built huge palaces and colossal statues of kings they called "Living Gods." The Egyptians turned their river valley into a field of monuments, the greatest of which were mountains of stone that excite wonder and awe to this day.

These cultures were built on the iron will of absolute monarchs and controlled by the iron men of mighty armies. They valued courage above compassion and they hunted lions to flaunt their courage to the world. Thousands of Barbary lions died under the spears of monarchs and their courts.

Still the depredations of these cultures was nothing compared to the darkness to come. Across the Mediterranean a small tribe of Italic warriors were building their tiny enclave into an empire that would eventually hold one fourth of the world's human population. Rome had conquered many kingdoms, and now they turned their eyes to the Kingdom of the Barbaries.

Their story follows.



THE ROMAN EMPIRE

It was the Roman Empire that first reduced the Barbary to small numbers. Roman Emperors sought to entertain the people and to reassure them that civilization had control over nature.

Individual lions could cost as much as three years earnings for a laborer. Emperor Trajan once staged gladiatorial games for 123 consecutive days where 11,000 animals were killed. Imagine other ways that money could have been spent to improve the lives of people.

Often criminals or slaves were condemned to face wild beasts. Lions were starved for three days prior to the event. If the lion killed its prey and survived, its fate would still be to die by being put in the arena with the bestiarii, men specially trained to kill wild animals.

A lucky few of the mighty cats were trained to put on a show to amuse the public. But the vast majority of them were thrust from the total darkness into the blinding sunlight of the arena merely to die on Roman steel.

The popularity of these cruel spectacles was such that, by the time they were outlawed, entire species were no longer to be found in their native habitat, all having been captured or driven away. Either 5,000 or 9,000 animals were reported to have died in the dedication of the Coliseum in 80 BC; 11,000 died in the celebration of Trajan's conquest of Dacia. That seems all the more incredible when you realize there are only 50,000 wild lions remaining in the entire world.

Over a million creatures died violently before cheering crowds, but it was also the silent plague of habitat loss that helped destroy the Kingdom of the Barbarians. As more trees became timber for the Empire and the cool glades retreated before barren desert, the deer moved on and the lions could not find prey. The Romans left many monuments. You can still see the Coliseum where death came suddenly, and you can still see the empty plains where death came slowly.



DEATH OF A RACE

The Roman carnage ended after six centuries, but the Barbary's troubles were not over. The Vandals and Byzantine Empire briefly held sway over the land until the Arabs came in the 600s.

As the Arab presence grew, the lions retreated. They were branded a nuisance and a reward was offered for every lion destroyed. Farmers killed lions to get paid. This sad practice continued for many years until the great Barbary Lion was rare across in its wide range.

By 1850 there were few lions left, because firearms gave man a terrible advantage. Anyone who could pull a trigger could kill a lion.

European hunters eyed these few remaining Barbaries for trophies. Like the Egyptians and Assyrians before them, they sought to prove their manhood by shedding the blood of lions. Only the hard part was no longer the kill but finding the victim. The mighty lords of North Africa had met an enemy they could not outfight or outwit and the end of their reign was growing near.

The Kingdom of the Barbaries went unchallenged for millennia. It shrank through centuries of Roman persecution. It withered from Arab decimation. It retreated from European "sportsmen." Under relentless persecution it had gone from a mighty empire to isolated pockets, then in 1922 to a single territory in the mountains of Morocco. A sport hunter's shot reduced the Kingdom of the Barbaries to a single blood-spattered patch of ground. As the last lion's lifeblood ebbed even that small patch was retreating. The last lion took in a deep breath, held it a moment, then let it out with a shudder. It was over.

AND YET....

Hidden away from the eyes of most people was the potential for its miraculous recovery. A new attitude would turn man from an enemy into a friend and breathe life back into the land of timeworn Berber campfire tales.

We told you this story ended on a note of hope. You can be a part of that hope. Read on....



THE HIDDEN TREASURE

Throughout the 1800s the Berbers had trapped Barbary lions alive and offered them in lieu of taxes to the Sultan of Morocco. Housed at the royal palaces in Marrakech and Fez, the 'Royal Lions' lived on long after their wild brothers had disappeared.

In the 1980s a hidden treasure was discovered in Ethiopia. Eleven lions that had once belonged to the deposed Emperor Haile Selassie were languishing in a half-forgotten zoo. The males had the dark full-length manes of Barbary Kings, and the lionesses had the squared faces of Barbary Queens. Could these lions be holding genes that would allow reconstruction of the race?



More possible Barbary Lions surfaced in the King's Collection at the Rabat Zoo of Morocco. There was a chance that some of them--perhaps all of them--might be pure Barbary!

Only genetic tests from several animals would be enough to bring the Barbary officially back to life. Samples of fur and teeth have been taken from Barbary remains from around the world. What is being determined is the genetic markers that make Barbaries different from all other lions.

Kay Hill, founder of Wildlink International, has a grand vision of rebirth for the Kingdom of the Barbaries. Through The International Barbary Lion Project, managed by WildLink, Kay is preparing to breed a new generation of Barbary Lions to return to the wild. The Moroccan government has set aside 150 square miles safely away from the dangers of civilized "development" where the ancient kings can once again issue their timeless challenge. "Whose land is this? It is mine, mine, mine!"



Trees must be planted and the Barbary red deer re-established, a modern cure for the damage done by the Romans. "It will cost millions to make the site suitable," Kay says, "but that's our long term aim." Man has at last made peace with the Barbary, invading the old kingdom not to destroy but to restore.

Rocky and Nala have been conditionally approved as Barbary Lions. Samples of their hair are soon to be tested. It is the fond hope of everyone associated with Tiger Touch that their descendents will return to their ancestral land. Do you want to see this happen? The key is in your hands.